

AN EXCAVATED TIKI PENDANT FROM RURUTU, AUSTRAL ISLANDS

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INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2003, the author excavated a *marae* site on the island of Rurutu in the Austral archipelago, French Polynesia. Among the finds from the Classic period deposit (ca. late 18th-early 19th centuries AD) was a tiki pendant of a hitherto-unknown iconography. This find is unique because it is the only carved Austral ornament from the Classic period that has ever been excavated from an archaeological site. As such, its provenience is certain, and the context in which it was found is well documented. Furthermore, as relatively few pieces of Austral island art survived the European transition of the early 19th century, this piece is significant in terms of our knowledge of the art history of this region. This paper discusses the pendant in comparison with other examples of carving from Rurutu, and investigates what its purpose might have been.

BACKGROUND TO THE AUSTRALS

The Austral archipelago makes up the eastern portion of the Cook-Austral chain, which includes the southern Cooks to the west (Figure 1). The Australs extend almost 1500 km from Maria in the northwest to Marotiri in the southeast. They are the southernmost archipelago in French Polynesia and include the volcanic islands Rimatara, Rurutu, Tubuai, Ra'ivavae, Rapa, as well as the uninhabited Maria atoll and Marotiri rock spires. Rurutu is located at 151°21' W and 22°27' S, 472 km southeast of Tahiti. Its nearest neighbors are Tubuai to the east (225 km) and Rimatara to the west (150 km). It is made up of a volcanic core (maximum elevation 389 m), surrounded by blocks of *makatea* (raised coral). The island is encircled by a narrow fringing reef (Figure 1).

The first Europeans to encounter the Australs were the men aboard James Cook's ship *The Resolution*. Rurutu, which Cook's guide Tupaia called "Ohetiroa" (i.e., Hiti-roa, the old name of Rurutu), was sighted on August 14, 1769. The fol-

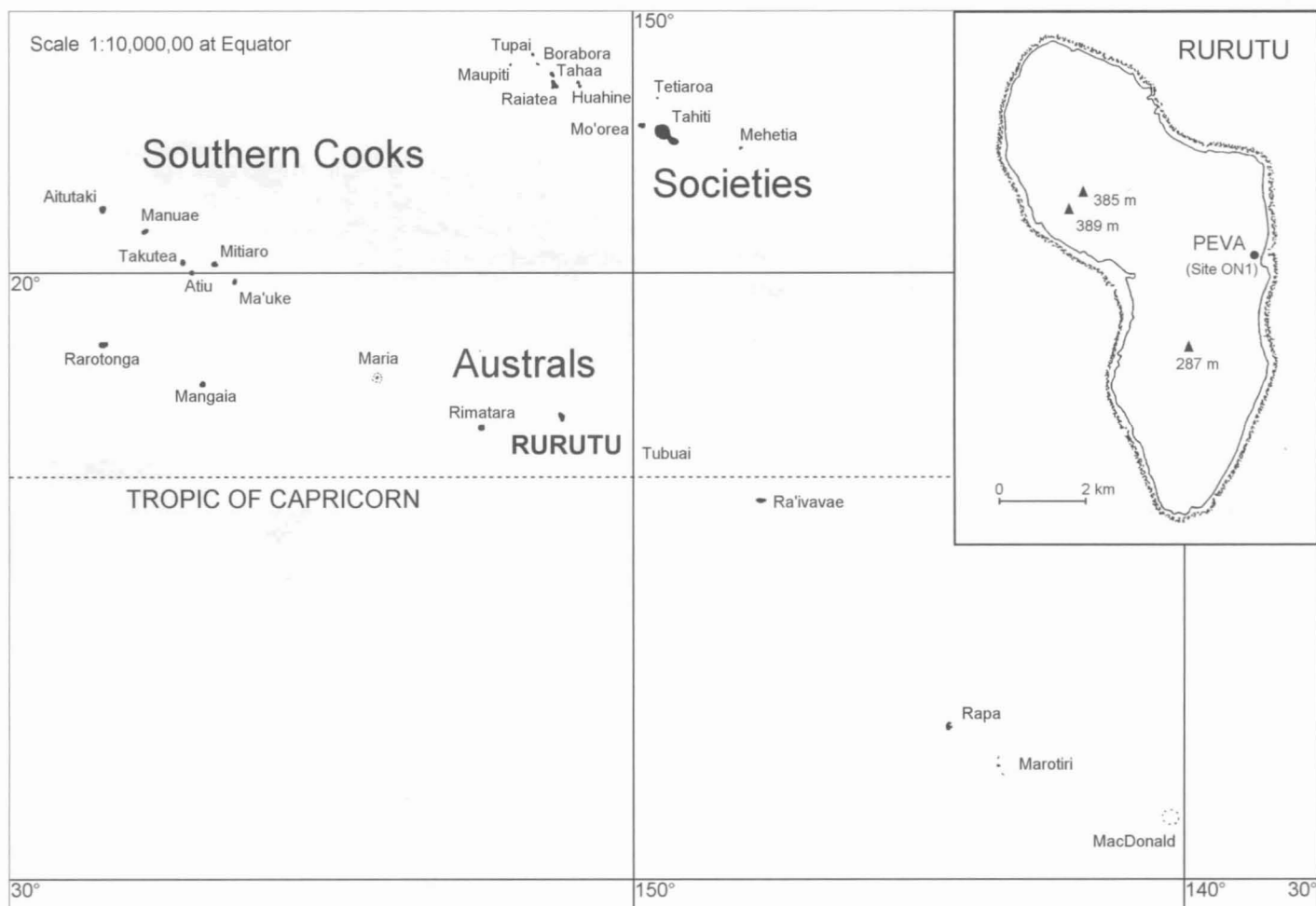


Figure 1. Central East Polynesia, and Rurutu with encircling fringing reef (insert).

lowing day Cook sent out a boat to see if they could learn anything from the islanders about what lay farther south. Coming aboard ship, the Rurutuans were overly aggressive in their desire for trade goods, and attempted to coax the boat in to land. Cook would have none of it and had muskets fired, perhaps killing one man, in order to chase the Rurutuans away from the ship. Cook then made the circuit of the island and was gone by August 16 (Cook 1955:155-5). Despite the brevity of the encounter, both Cook and Joseph Banks found the time to be considerably impressed by the objects that the Rurutuans wore and carried. Banks (1962:333) was inspired to write, "Of the few things we saw among these people every one was ornamented infinitely superior to any thing we had before seen: their cloth was better coloured as well as nicely painted, their clubs were better cut out and polished, the Canoe which we saw tho a very small and very narrow one was nevertheless carved and ornamented very highly." Cook (1955:156) was also quite impressed: "their arms and in general every thing they had about them much neater made and shew'd great proofs of an ingenious fancy." It must be remembered that these men had spent months in the Societies and had already seen many remarkable things. It is also significant that among the items Cook's crew managed to trade for during the unpleasant exchange were a fine specimen of woodcarving adorned with two tikis and a dog-like animal (Barrow 1979: Figure 55), as well as some fly whisks (Rose 1979: Figure 10-8).

Few ships stopped at Rurutu in the following years, thereby limiting the number of extant specimens of craftsmanship. In the early 1800s, European contact introduced diseases that decimated the population, as had happened throughout Polynesia. Beginning in the early 1800s, the population of Rurutu fell from an estimated 3000 people to around 300. By the 1920s the population had grown to 1240 (Seabrook 1938:10), but the knowledge of traditional artwork was long lost. The Australs were extremely quick to convert to Christianity, a fact that also contributed to the decline of craftsmanship. The first island to make this transition was Ra'ivavae. In 1819 Pomare II of Tahiti visited Ra'ivavae and left a representative of his there. Two years later all but 25 people were Christian converts (Ellis 1969b:377). The story of Rurutu's evangelization is rather unique, as recorded by Ellis (1969b:395-404), an eyewitness. In 1820, because of the spread of illness on the island, the populace began to pray to the gods in order to be rid of it. When this failed, a young chief named Auura decided to lead a group to find refuge in Tubuai. Some weeks later they tried to return to Rurutu, were unable to land, and were blown off course all the way to Maupiti in the Societies. The crew proceeded on to Borabora and then Raiatea, where for the first time they saw the homes of European missionaries. Auura and his companions decided to convert. In 1821 a ship on which Ellis himself was on board picked up Auura, his companions, and two Raiatean Christians, and brought them back to Rurutu. The Raiateans immediately broke several *tapu*, which shocked the people. As nothing supernatural happened to the Raiateans, Auura convinced the people to put their old faith to a test. The following day they would hold a feast, in which sacred, *tapu* foods such as turtle and pig would be consumed by women, to whom these foods were forbidden. Despite the priests' warning, nothing amiss occurred. This

convinced the population that their old ways were false, and immediately they began to wreck the *marae* and the idols within (Ellis 1969b:399-400). The statue of the god A'a (Figure 4), the only extant specimen of its kind, was sent to Raiatea and displayed there as a trophy. When Ellis returned to Rurutu in 1822, Christianity was well established. People had started to build plastered European-style houses, as well as a chapel (Ellis 1969b:400-1). Perceiving these benefits, in the same year Tubuai sent word to Tahiti requesting teachers (Ellis 1969b:385). Also in 1822, missionaries arrived in Rimatara, where they too met with eager converts (Ellis 1969b:390-1). In 1824 Ellis observed that many more were living in more modern homes and wearing "decent clothing" (Ellis 1969b:200). Quickly, traditional crafts such as canoe-building were abandoned. Soon carpenters were more expert at constructing European schooners and whaleboats. Weapons, *tapa*, and carved wooden objects were manufactured for trade to missionaries in exchange for items such as tobacco (Seabrook 1938:8).

Sadly, all these events contributed to the fact that there are not many examples of art from the Australs compared to other regions of East Polynesia. Barrow (1979:54) wrote, "The iconography of the Australs is little known, nor are its meanings understood. The few wooden images that survived destruction by converts to Christianity suggest a once rich range of image types." Complex imagery abounds in the few pieces of Austral art that have come down to us. There are double-headed 'Janus' figures (Barrow 1979: Plate 52), pigs, and pieces of outstanding imagination and execution such as the A'a. The Austral tiki tradition in general is not well known, as stone tikis have only been found on Ra'ivavae (Barrow 1972:118; 1979: Plates 61, 63). Most extant wooden images also come from Ra'ivavae, as do most other pieces such as decorated canoe paddles and drums. The year of Rurutu's evangelization (1821) was probably when most of its wooden images were destroyed.

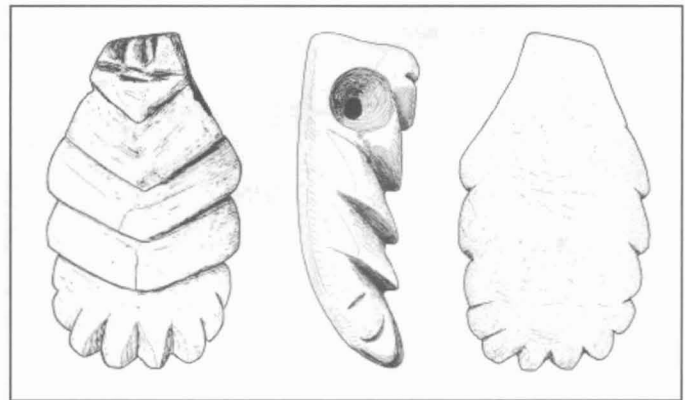


Figure 2. The Rurutu tiki pendant (ON1-L17-1). Height 3 cm.

Fortunately, Austral island carving was appreciated in other parts of Polynesia, notably in the Societies. The Australs were renowned for both carving and *tapa* cloth manufacture (Barrow 1979:54). Items that were most probably manufactured by Austral artisans, such as fly whisks, were collected in the Societies, and probably in the southern Cooks as well, where they were designated by such general terms as "Hervey

(Cook) Islands" (Buck 1944; Barrow 1979; Rose 1979). On the one hand, these Austral items collected in other areas add to the body of artwork that is still with us. On the other hand, the lack of provenience makes saying much more about localized traditions difficult.

THE RURUTU TIKI PENDANT

The subject of this article is the tiki pendant illustrated in Figure 2. To my knowledge, it is the only one of its kind anywhere. It was found in the summer of 2003, during excavations in Peva Valley, on the grounds of a *marae* complex called Uramoa (Site ON1), which is a celebrated *marae* on Rurutu. Seabrook (1938:180) wrote, "*Marae* Uramoa in south Peva...is said to have been built by the rather legendary *marae*-founder of the Australs, Tupaea; Tupaea founded Uramoa with a cornerstone brought from *marae* Tonohae in Tupuai (Tubuai)." The pendant comes from a deposit that ranges from 10 cm to 20 cm below surface level, and is associated with activities upon the *marae* itself, notably feasting, represented by an abundance of sacred foods such as turtle and pig (full details are in Bolt 2005). Based on the associated midden and artifacts, the pendant dates from probably no later than the early 19th century, and possibly earlier. Radiocarbon dates on *Turbo setosus* shell from this deposit yielded dates too late for calibration, and no charcoal was found. Knowing what we do about Rurutu's evangelization, it is likely that 1821 is a definitive cutoff date for activities associated with the traditional religion.

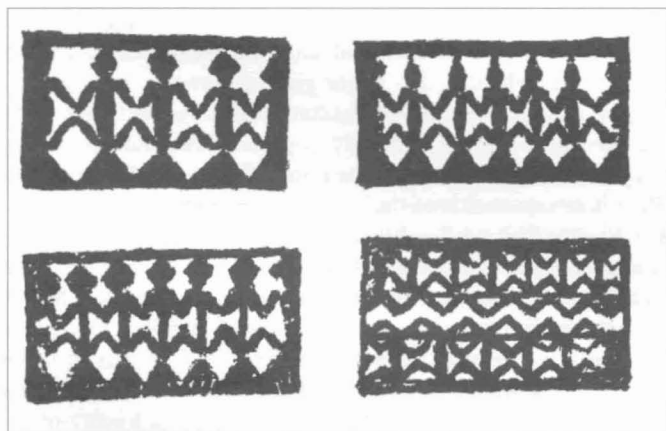


Figure 3. Chevron motifs forming anthropomorphic figures from a Ra'ivavae drum (Adapted from Barrow 1972: Figure 191).

The material of the pendant appears to be whale ivory. Because the figure is only carved on one side, it is almost certainly a necklace unit. While abstract, the figure is clearly anthropomorphic. It has been carved into a series of five chevron ridges, the uppermost being the head, the bottommost being the feet. The chevron was the most popular carving motif in the Australs, and was common throughout Polynesia. "The chevron theme in Polynesian art is related closely to certain stylized human figures" (Barrow 1972:110). The chevron motif was used with marvelous virtuosity on Ra'ivavae to create the complex decorations on canoe paddles and drums (Figure 3). On the Rurutu pendant, the chevron motif is used to remarkable effect. The head is plainly visible, the apex of the

chevron being the chin. The head has been drilled through to accommodate a string, which would have been made of coconut sennit or human hair. Horizontal slits have been made across the face to represent the eyes and nose. The vertical slits above the eyes might represent hair, or perhaps a feather headdress, a high-status adornment on Rurutu during the Classic period. The ridge under the head serves as the neck, perhaps adorned with a collar of some sort. The following two chevron ridges represent the arms and the stomach. On tikis

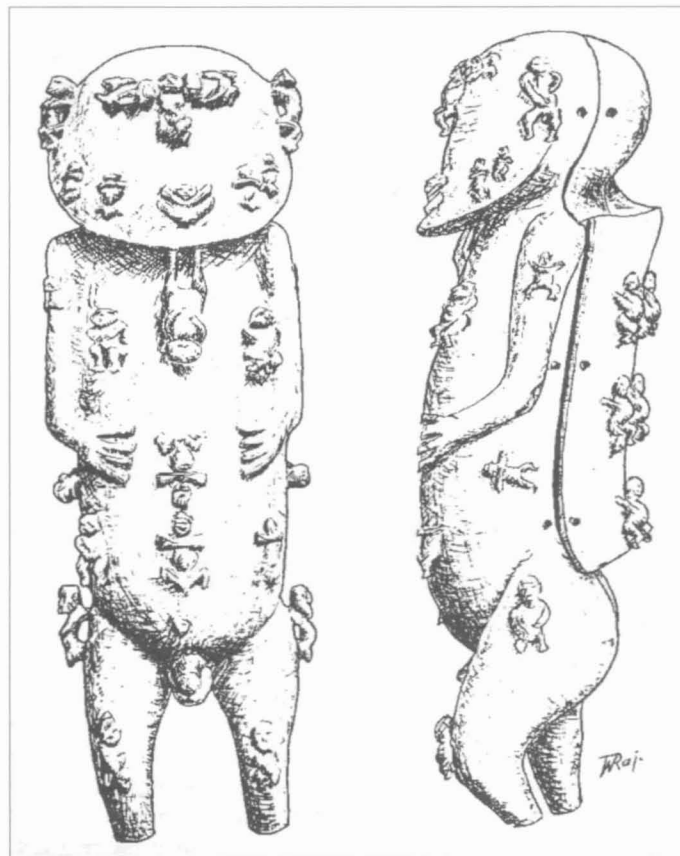


Figure 4. A'a (from Vêrin 1969: Figure 114).

the arms are typically folded across the belly, and this impression is admirably conveyed by the chevrons. The final ridge consists of the feet, and more specifically the toes, of which there appear to be eight (or possibly six). The back of the piece is polished smooth. Overall, the simplicity is quite elegant.

The question now becomes, what is the pendant's relationship to other anthropomorphic figures known from Rurutu? On the surface of it, it does not seem to have any direct parallels. From Rurutu the main anthropomorphic figures we have are the A'a, the wooden piece that Cook's crew acquired, and an assortment of fly whisk handles. The A'a (Figure 4, for photographs see Barrow 1972: Figures 183-185; 1979: Figures 57 and 58) is a composite figure, consisting of a main body 112 cm high. Smaller human figures in various shapes and poses ingeniously make up the facial features and decorate the trunk. The body is hollow, and is opened by a removable panel on its back. This compartment once contained additional figures that are now lost (Williams 1837; Barrow 1972:113, 1979:58). The Rurutu pendant resembles,

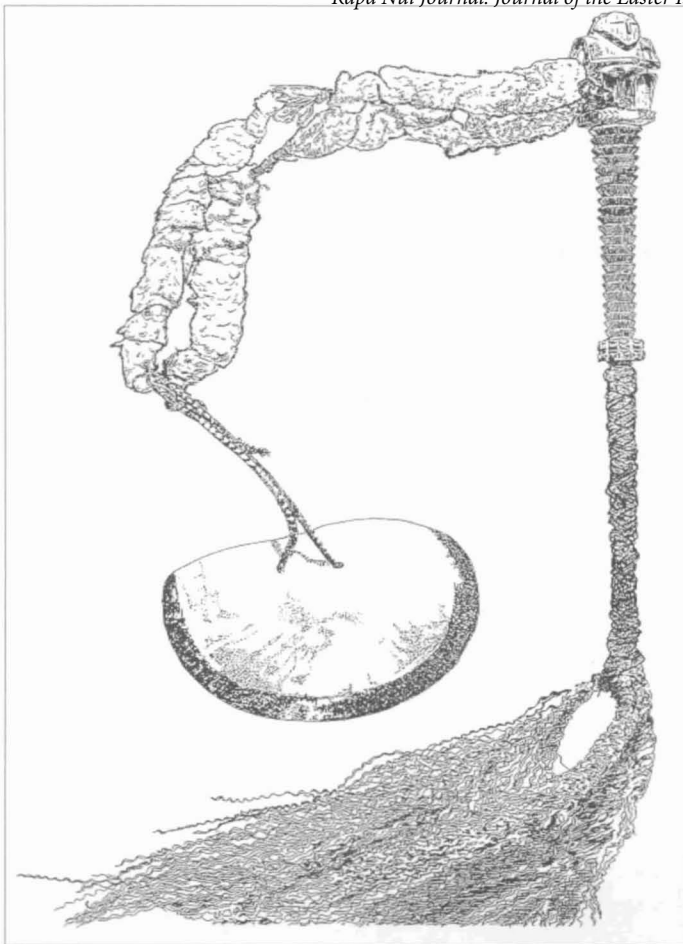


Figure 5. A fly whisk from Tubuai (after CTRDP 1997).

in general outline, some of the figures that sprout out of the body of the A'a. However, the pendant is considerably more abstract, probably due to its small size. The figures on the Cook woodcarving (Barrow 1979: Figure 55) are different than those on the A'a but still less abstract than the pendant. Again, the pendant is considerably smaller than the figures on the woodcarving. For smaller examples of anthropomorphic figures, we can turn to the fly whisk handles. Austral fly whisk handles (e.g., the example from Tubuai in Figure 5) are typically decorated with a single figure (often a double-headed 'Janus' figure) on the proximal end seated upon a shallow disk atop a handle carved with additional motifs along its length, followed by a larger wheel around the middle of the handle, also decorated, followed by the remainder of the handle, to which the coconut fiber whisks were attached (Barrow

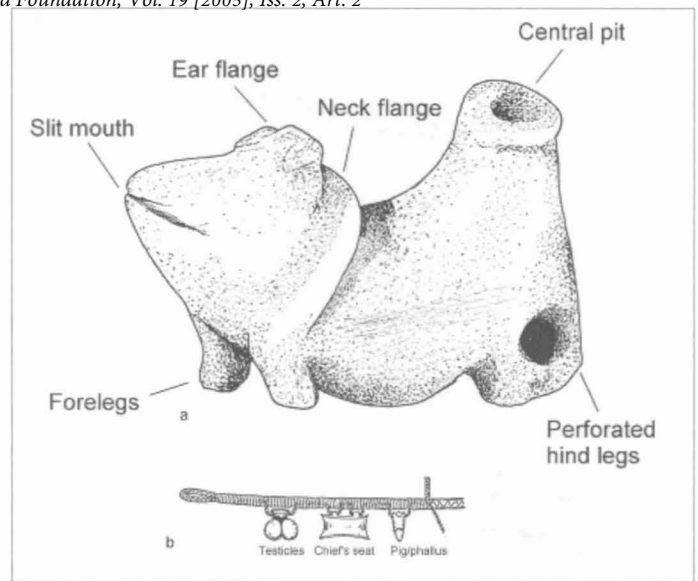


Figure 7. a) 'Pig' unit from an Austral necklace, length 3 cm (after Barrow 1979: Plate 75; terminology from Buck 1944: Figure 58); b) attachment of necklace ornaments (from Buck 1944: Figure 59).

1979: Figure 56; Rose 1979). The main figures on the proximal ends of the fly whisks show considerable variation, with differing degrees of abstraction. The figure on the fly whisk illustrated in Figure 5 is a typical small tiki, in the traditional pose of which the Rurutu pendant is an example. However, it is on the medial ornamental wheel of the fly whisk handle (Figure 6) that we find the best match for the Rurutu pendant. Rose (1979:204) described it as follows: "The motif, which consists of a pair of identical units on the upper and lower edge of the wheel with a slight groove between, is possibly a highly abstract version of the crouching human form." Although these motifs probably represent two human forms, they are similar to the Rurutu pendant. This lends support to Rose's interpretation of the motifs as abstract humans. In sum, the Rurutu tiki, while obviously part of the localized carving tradition, possesses unique characteristics found nowhere else. While more abstract than pieces such as the A'a, it is less so than the motifs that decorate the fly whisk handles. One of the most striking features of the pendant are its feet. It is probable that the toes are a continuation of the chevron motif, albeit in miniature, which makes up the neck, arms, and belly of the figure. Another interesting characteristic of the pendant is the face, where a concerted effort was made to distinguish the eyes and nose, as well as the hair or headdress, using a few simple notches.



Figure 6. Detail of motifs from the rims of ornamental disks on fly whisks (from Rose 1969: Figures 10-3, 10-6). Note: this does not come from the Tubuai fly whisk illustrated in Figure 5.

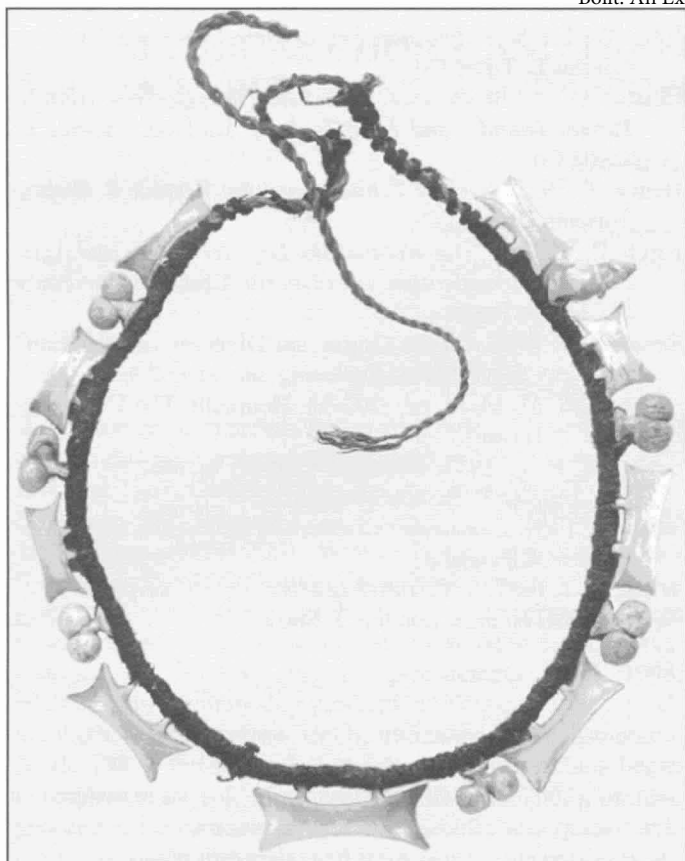


Figure 8. A complete necklace with a single pig unit in the upper right section. This particular necklace sold for \$313,750 at a Sotheby's auction in May 2000, a record price for a piece of Polynesian jewelry (Photo courtesy of Sotheby's).

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF NECKLACE UNITS

As stated above, the Rurutu tiki was found on a *marae*, in a context in which sacred, *tapu* foods such as pig and turtle were being consumed. Only high-status male individuals such as chiefs and priests were permitted such delicacies, and it is likely that the tiki itself belonged to some such man. In this respect, it is worth turning our attention to a particular type of Austral necklace. These necklaces have three types of units: pigs, testicles, and a chief's seat. In Polynesia, the pig is a well-attested form of specifically male wealth (e.g., Kirch 1994). On Rurutu, this was embedded in artistic symbolism, with this pig motif used to decorate objects such as necklaces, bowls, and spear shafts (Buck 1944: Figure 268; Barrow 1972: Plate 186; Barrow 1979: Plates 74, 75). 'Pig' units with a distinctly phallic shape (Figure 7), were strung onto necklaces (Figure 8) alongside units representing human testicles and flared oblong pieces representing the seats of chiefs (Barrow 1972: Plate 192; 1979:68, Plate 74). Barrow (1972:117) wrote: "The attached amulets have significance as symbols of chiefly status. The phallic element represents the virility of the chief, the seats his rank, and the pigs his wealth and food."

Considering the obvious significance of these necklaces (of which several examples have survived in museums throughout the world) in terms of the social hierarchy, we should ask ourselves if the Rurutu pendant might have been

part of a similar high-status item, one of which no examples exist? This is an intriguing idea, and conceivable in view of the fact that the pendant is as fine a piece of work as any upon these necklaces. Additionally, both it and the pig unit are 3 cm in length. Given that the Austral necklaces that have come down to us featured a series of different units and not just one, I believe that the Rurutu tiki was part of a more complicated piece. Because the pendant was found in a secure archaeological context, we can postulate that it was probably worn by an individual, most likely male, who had access to the *marae* and the *tapu* foods that were eaten there. This suggests a chief or a priest, making it probable that the pendant, like most tikis, is a representation of a god or ancestral spirit, which would have been appropriate to the religious nature of the site. As such, it may have served a ceremonial capacity during the rituals that were performed there. Also found in the *marae* deposit was an intact *Triton* conch shell trumpet, whose use in Polynesian ceremony is well attested (e.g., Henry 1928:391). Obviously, as we are already in the realm of speculation, to go any further would be impossible. Even less is known about the pre-Christian religion of the Australs than about the artistic traditions.

CONCLUSIONS

Few examples of Austral island artwork have survived the centuries. Those that have are among the finest from anywhere in Polynesia, and were prized by other archipelagos such as the Society Islands, where some examples were collected in early historic times (Rose 1979). The Rurutu tiki is a new addition to the body of published pieces from these islands. While it draws upon some of the known motifs present in the fly whisk handles and other carvings, it is quite unique and stands apart. Based on its archaeological provenience, the tiki was probably worn as part of a necklace by a chief or a priest. The tiki is likely a representation of a god or ancestral spirit, one who may have been important to the *marae* and its ceremonies. The Rurutu tiki is significant because it is the first example of Austral carving recovered from an archaeological context. It is even more important as the first ornament of its kind, one that enhances our understanding of Polynesian decorative motifs and the 'tiki tradition' of the Australs.

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